

# *Understanding the Role of Public Engagement in the Digital Preservation of Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage—Taking TikTok as an Example*

Xinyi Cheng

*Hunan Shangya Culture Communication Co., Ltd, Xiangtan, 411100, China  
Chengxinyibb666@163.com*

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage, digital preservation, TikTok

**Abstract:** With the popularity of ICH content on TikTok, scholars have begun to pay more attention to its digital preservation function and its role in ICH protection. On the one hand, TikTok can introduce intangible cultural heritage to a wider audience through fragmented narratives, new perspectives, micro-expressions, and interesting stories; on the other hand, it can also increase the commercial value of its carriers. However, there are still some problems such as homogenization and repetition, lack of connotation, and cultural authenticity distortion. Previous studies mainly focused on the platform, ICH carriers, and short video creators, but ignored the user's point of view. Based on this background, this paper takes the protection of ICH on TikTok as the research background and selects Jiang Xunqian's (September) iron flowers creation video as the object of study. By analyzing the comments of the video, this paper explores the public participation function of TikTok short videos for ICH digital preservation. The results show that public participation has a positive effect on ICH digital preservation. In particular, women as viewers, creators or potential ICH carriers actively participate in ICH protection through public participation and revitalize it. This not only shows the importance of adding female perspectives but also reveals the new vitality brought by public participation to ICH protection.

## **1. Introduction**

In the mobile Internet field, short videos have become one of the most influential fields. TikTok has become the leader in short video social media <sup>[1]</sup>. TikTok is a creative music-based short video platform that allows users to create and share videos with popular music, often lip-syncing <sup>[2]</sup>. In addition, many users record their daily lives and produce various types of content, such as feature films, documentaries, micro-movies, and music videos. For example, 'Molten Iron Throwing Show (Da Tie Hua)' is a representative video of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The blogger Jiang Xunqian (also known as September) created this viral video with 7.08 million likes. The video shows the process of September, an ICH apprentice, learning from a male expert how to perform the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show'. This video received widespread attention and discussion not only in official Chinese media but also on social media. It can represent high-quality ICH content in TikTok short videos. Similarly, many ICH-related videos have appeared on TikTok, which has led to a

‘heritage craze’<sup>[3]</sup>. Based on this trend and inspired by September’s video, this paper investigates the public’s engagement with TikTok short videos in the context of ICH dissemination and preservation.

The preservation of ICH has always been a global issue. In the past, the preservation of ICH relied on written records or oral transmission, and many important elements were lost, ignored, or misinterpreted<sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, digital preservation was proposed. Digital preservation is the process of documenting ICH resources, converting them into digital resources through input scanning, photography, transcription, and other technical tools, and then storing and disseminating them<sup>[5]</sup>. Many studies have focused on the use of digital technology to protect ICH. These include high-resolution imaging, 3D scanning and printing, video recording, geographic information systems, motion capture, 3D modelling, virtual reality and augmented reality. However, these technologies are often expensive and require specialized knowledge, and they rely on government or large organizational support, which limits public access and awareness.

In light of these challenges, TikTok has emerged as a more accessible and public-centric method of digital preservation. Proactively, the TikTok platform has initiated efforts to foster a conducive environment for the preservation and perpetuation of ICH. In particular, it has introduced the ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage Partnership’ programme, bolstered its algorithmic support for relevant video content, added monetization avenues, and engaged in urban partnerships to unlock the market and cultural value of ICH, thereby championing its broader dissemination<sup>[1]</sup>. Consequently, a growing contingent of ICH inheritors are gravitating towards showcasing and recording their unique skills or performances on TikTok, often together with contemporary music. This initiative seeks to spark intrigue and cognizance of ICH amongst the wider population, particularly younger demographics, cultivating their awareness and propelling their involvement in preservation initiatives<sup>[6]</sup>. A significant portion of Chinese academic discourse appraises TikTok’s value in terms of ICH inheritors or video creators, emphasizing the expanded reach and potential revenue streams on the platform<sup>[6]</sup>. However, in contrast, some scholars have highlighted pressing concerns such as overt homogenization, repetitiveness, shallow interpretations, and potential compromises to cultural veracity in ICH-themed videos<sup>[7]</sup>. Yet, while there’s a plethora of scholarship evaluating TikTok’s role in ICH preservation from multifaceted angles, the user-centric perspective remains starkly underrepresented.

Given the aforementioned academic discussion and observed research gaps, this dissertation focuses on the relationship between public participation, ICH conservation, and digital preservation. Its mission is to explore the impact of public interaction within the digital realm of TikTok short videos, as a conduit for ICH digital preservation. Specifically, this paper seeks to dissect the mechanics of how public engagement supports ICH preservation through TikTok’s digital architecture. It endeavors to understand public sentiment and actions, comprehend their roles, and underscore their significance. By exploring these research avenues, this study seeks to increase public understanding and foster pragmatic endeavors in ICH conservation. In addition, it also offers a fresh perspective, focusing on the public’s influence on ICH, thereby presenting new perspectives on safeguarding ICH.

## 2. Grassroots preservation of ICH

The proliferation of Web 2.0, augmented smartphone penetration, and the ever-growing appetite for online connectivity have precipitated a shift in cultural heritage interactions and dialogues from conventional face-to-face engagements to digital mediums. These digital exchanges manifest in diverse forms, such as forums, computer games, or through sharing multimedia and perspectives on social networking platforms. Social media, including a plethora of platforms — from photo-sharing applications like Instagram and multimedia hubs such as YouTube to textual communication

platforms like Facebook and Twitter—empowers users to effortlessly generate and disseminate content. These platforms provide a low-cost avenue for virtually all internet users to broadcast, communicate, and access information. This paradigm shift has transposed ICH dialogues to social platforms, rendering them more grassroots, democratized, and universally accessible.

In light of these developments, the digital preservation of ICH via social media platforms has garnered significant scholarly interest. There's a consensus of positivity surrounding the relationship between ICH and social media, with its future prospects looking bright <sup>[8]</sup>. Indeed, Morales-i-Gras et al. <sup>[9]</sup>, using the example of ICH-related tweets, argued that social media offers a dynamic platform for communities to share their cultural narratives, thereby contributing to the preservation and archiving of ICH, ultimately enhancing collective community memory. Yang <sup>[10]</sup> highlighted, through a synthesis of literature and relevant legal documentation, that social media facilitates a multi-faceted approach to ICH digitization – from archiving and research to promotion and inheritance – thereby compensating for the limitations of traditional communication channels. This can increase public awareness and foster a culture of protection education. Building on this, Muhammad & Kim <sup>[11]</sup> suggested that online communities can also foster intercultural understanding across various demographic markers, such as race, class, gender, and age. Furthermore, Lafreniere et al. <sup>[12]</sup> found that social media encourages collaborations between local communities, ICH inheritors, and professionals, thereby blurring traditional professional boundaries. This democratization allows for a rich exchange of cultural insights and expertise, bolstering educational outreach. In summary, the rise and evolution of social media have markedly augmented public participation in ICH, fostering notable advancements in its digital recording, protection, and dissemination.

In China, the stringent online censorship, colloquially known as the 'Great Firewall', restricts access to international social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Within the plethora of domestic alternatives such as Weibo, WeChat, and Red, TikTok (locally known as Douyin) has risen to prominence. Developed by the Chinese start-up, ByteDance, TikTok is distinguished by its short video challenges wherein users can generate content aligned with trending audio or create personalized narratives stemming from their daily experiences <sup>[13]</sup>. Every trending soundtrack or filter can potentially be replicated by millions of users, underscoring its immense popularity across China <sup>[13]</sup>. Given its low entry barrier, cost-effectiveness, and real-time engagement, TikTok has become a vital source of entertainment, information, and enrichment for its users <sup>[14]</sup>. Riding this wave, a multitude of ICH inheritors and governmental media entities have embraced TikTok, producing short video content to advocate for and safeguard ICH. As a result, numerous scholars in China have delved deeply into this phenomenon. To access the Chinese local version, users from other countries often need to employ Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and Chinese accounts for downloading. Furthermore, a Chinese phone number is required for login verification, thus limiting the number of foreign scholars able to examine ICH content on TikTok. Thus, most studies on this topic are consequently authored by Chinese researchers.

Guangmei <sup>[7]</sup> explored that TikTok's fragmented narrative style not only captivates the audience but also resonates with today's rapid-paced life, making ICH more relatable and a form of mass entertainment, especially among the youth. Cao <sup>[15]</sup> contended that TikTok's short videos have broadened ICH's outreach via innovative perspectives, compelling narratives, dynamic video edits, and engaging online vernacular while Wang et al. <sup>[16]</sup>, through their study of Chaozhou woodcarving videos, identified prevalent comment themes revolving around cultural memory, identity, and heritage. Their findings support the claims of the significance of TikTok as a potent medium for ICH preservation. Zhang <sup>[17]</sup> also underscored TikTok's commercial aspect, noting how artisans seamlessly integrate their crafts into their videos, thereby encouraging viewer purchases and financially sustaining their trade.

However, certain scholars offer a more critical perspective on TikTok's role in ICH conservation.

For example, Wang and Yu <sup>[13]</sup> discussed the challenges of producing ICH short videos, noting that content uniformity can result in viewers experiencing aesthetic monotony. They also cautioned against certain comedic content that may misrepresent or trivialise the cultural integrity of ICH elements such as the traditional Shadow Play. The potential pitfalls arising from the absence of stringent review procedures, which can result in the dissemination of incorrect or misleading ICH information. In addition, Zheng <sup>[18]</sup> highlighted the prevalence of unverified ‘ICH inheritor’ accounts, complicating the audience’s ability to discern authentic ICH content and risking potential misrepresentation or commercial exploitation. Subsequently, the divergence between different stakeholders such as inheritors and ordinary practitioners may further widen. Finally, by analyzing the short video content released by an ICH inheritor on TikTok, Yi <sup>[6]</sup> pointed out that both the TikTok platform and short video creators need to adapt to China’s policy structure and management of mainstream ideas, that is, to show the positive side of life and the government, which will bring pressure and restrictions to them.

### 3. Research methods

#### 3.1. Research questions

Previous research has explored broad topics surrounding ICH protection, including the potential and pitfalls of digital preservation, and the efficacy of platforms such as TikTok in safeguarding ICH. While global scholars have extensively researched the role of social media in ICH protection and many in China have investigated the connection between ICH and TikTok, English-language studies specifically addressing ICH in the context of TikTok are relatively scarce. This presents a challenge for non-Chinese speakers seeking references on the topic. Furthermore, most scholars from outside China haven’t explored the emerging realm of ICH preservation via TikTok short videos, marking a unique contribution of this dissertation to this niche intersection. The review of the existing literature reveals numerous studies discussing the advantages TikTok offers ICH inheritors and its role as an official platform. There’s also a fair amount of discourse on the platform’s limitations in preserving ICH. However, a glaring gap in the literature is the perspective of the TikTok audience and users, particularly concerning their role in the preservation process.

The involvement of the general public in ICH digital preservation, especially as TikTok users and viewers, cannot be understated. As an instrumental tool for ICH preservation, the active participation and understanding of TikTok’s user base are as pivotal as the call from governments and scholars for heightened public awareness. Meanwhile, the current ICH protection pointed out in the literature urgently needs the improvement of public awareness and participation, which can also be further studied in the environment of TikTok, because there are diverse and adequate ICH contents created by inheritors and the public in short videos of TikTok. This underscores the importance of empirical research in this domain. Bridging this research gap, this dissertation employs the Chinese ICH — ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show’ video — as a case study to address the central research question: How does public engagement support the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) via the digital realm of TikTok short videos?

Supporting research questions include:

- What role does the public play in this preservation process?
- Why is public engagement crucial in this context?

#### 3.2. Data collection

This paper uses a video from a KOL named Jiang Xunqian (also known as September), who has 12.89 million fans on TikTok, to demonstrate the Chinese ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show (Da Tie Hua)’,

which is one of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). We use Python to scrape all comments in this video as the data source. The reason for choosing TikTok is that it is currently the most popular platform for disseminating China's ICH <sup>[1]</sup>. As of 2023, there are 2.05 billion registered users worldwide on TikTok, with 1.04 billion monthly active users <sup>[19]</sup>. Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, has more than 750 million daily active users, making it a social media giant in China. In April 2019, TikTok launched the 'ICH Collaborators' programme to create an open ICH platform that can protect its essence while modernizing its content and communication methods <sup>[13]</sup>. In addition, in 2020, TikTok launched the 'Making Artisanry Visible' campaign to promote the economic development of more than 1,000 craftsmen <sup>[13]</sup>. Moreover, TikTok cooperated with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China to launch projects such as 'ICH Market' and 'ICH Travelling on Cloud' to increase people's knowledge about ICH and promote ICH products. These initiatives have promoted the cultural confidence of the Chinese people and resulted in a total of 372.6 billion ICH-related videos on TikTok with 9.4 billion likes <sup>[20]</sup>. Among them, 99.74% of national ICH projects are included in short videos on TikTok <sup>[20]</sup>. Considering both user engagement and the platform's support for ICH-related content, we believe that TikTok plays an important role in promoting ICH.

The research object of this paper is the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show (Da Tie Hua)'. According to a preliminary search on CNKI, there is no academic literature on this ICH. The Molten Iron Throwing Show is an ancient folk performance in Henan Province with a history of thousands of years. The performers throw molten iron heated above 1000 degrees into the sky, and the iron blooms bloom ten meters high, which makes it one of China's most valuable ICHs. Jiang Xunqian (September)'s video was the most popular video about the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' on TikTok and also her favorite video. Therefore, it is taken as the case study in this paper. After being released, the video received extensive media coverage, attracted a large number of viewers, and inspired other creators to make related videos. This video tells the story of September, who learns from a male inheritor of the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' and finally masters this difficult skill. In the video, she was told that because girls are not strong enough and are prone to injury, this technology can only be taught to men. However, she did not feel discouraged after hearing this. She learned from the teacher humbly and practiced hard regardless of the weather conditions. Although she failed many times, she never gave up and finally succeeded in performing this show. When the iron flower bloomed in the sky due to her, many netizens expressed their emotions and excitement in the comment section. She said that although her clothes were full of holes, she had some small burns and her hair had been permed a lot, but all these were meaningful and worthwhile. She also hoped to contribute her strength to this beautiful ICH performance so that more people could see it.

### 3.3. Data cleaning

The comments under the short video on TikTok are not arranged according to the number of likes. Therefore, this study first collected all comments on Jiang Xunqian (September)'s 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' video and organized them into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The information in the spreadsheet includes the comment content, user name, time of posting, number of likes, user region, and page number. The number of likes is an important indicator of whether the audience likes the creator <sup>[14]</sup>. A high-quality short video that is well received will quickly convert the audience into followers and maintain their interest in the creator's TikTok account <sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, this article selects the top 1,000 comments on the video according to the number of likes, which are sorted from 1 to 1000.

After the table of the top 1,000 comments sorted by likes was created, it was necessary to clean the data for further analysis. As this research focused on users' behavioral tendencies in comments, content they mentioned, sentiment towards the video (positive, neutral or negative), and influence of



the main comments on ICH preservation were considered. Therefore, emojis and usernames were removed from the dataset.

### 3.4. Data analysis

To address the research questions, this article employs the content analysis method. Content analysis is a systematic technique used to analyse and interpret various forms of communication, ranging from text and images to audio. This method enables the systematic examination of content to identify patterns, themes, and other salient features. Based on these findings, researchers can draw informed conclusions. By utilizing this approach, insights could be gleaned about public perceptions, actions, and attitudes related to the video, as well as how these factors intersect with ICH protection. To provide a holistic view, this article combines both quantitative and qualitative analytical strategies.

Detailing the method's operational steps, content analysis mandates setting clear data collection criteria, defining the study's scope (i.e., deciding on included and excluded content), and then gathering the requisite data. As outlined in previous sections of this chapter, these steps have already been addressed. Subsequent stages involve coding and classifying the dataset — which consists of words, phrases, themes, or concepts from the collected text <sup>[21]</sup>. Ultimately, a thorough analysis of the coded and classified data was undertaken.

For the article's quantitative analysis, comments with the top 1,000 likes formed the foundation of a word cloud, providing insight into the most frequently mentioned words. This visual representation allowed us to identify the focal points of the audience's attention. Subsequently, a qualitative deep dive into the comments associated with the most repeated words revealed themes and underlying connotations, providing an understanding of users' subjective experiences and sentiments. Given the inherent cognitive and attitudinal shifts that short video consumption can induce <sup>[1]</sup>, this study accentuated the multifaceted roles of the public: as TikTok users, viewers, participants, and secondary communicators. Their evolving psychological reception, understanding, and shifting attitudes are central to this analysis <sup>[1]</sup>. Introducing sentiment analysis further refined the coding of the comment data.

It's pivotal to note that the original comments on the video are in Chinese. To facilitate a seamless analysis, the researcher provided English translations. Adopting a structured approach, this article formulated a distinct set of coding rules tailored to the research questions and employs manual coding. This ensures a transparent, replicable process, increasing the study's reliability <sup>[21]</sup>. The foundation of these rules is the concept of 'living state' propagation. Globally, UNESCO and many scholars advocate for the preservation of each ICH as a fluid, evolving entity. Extending this sentiment, Chinese academia promotes the invigorated and widespread propagation of ICH, rooted in the 'living' ethos. Here, the term 'living state' implies a shift from conventions, embracing innovation and transformative perspectives. In the context of digital ICH conservation, it suggests a digital reimagination, adding fresh dimensions and insights. Grounded in this framework, the analysis coded for new elements or concepts emerging in the comments related to high-frequency keywords from the video of Jiang Xunqian (September)'s 'Molten Iron Throwing Show'. Emotive words associated with these novel elements, such as 'touching', 'happy', 'angry', and 'sad', further informed the thematic categorization.

## 4. Research results

Building upon the research methods outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter examines the principal research findings and connects them with established theory. It begins by presenting one of the most frequently occurring keywords extracted from the quantitative analysis of the word cloud, which is 'female'. Then, through qualitative thematic analysis, it explores how female power, gender

stereotypes, and gender bias are articulated and reflected in all comments containing female-related keywords. Finally, this chapter also offers an in-depth exploration of the negative ramifications of gender bias and associated inequalities on the inheritance of ICH.

#### **4.1. Females have joined ICH protection as a new actor**

A total of 221,763 comments were collected using Python, excluding all secondary comments, which consist of replies to other comments. The Word Cloud diagram, composed of the top 1,000 comments based on video likes, showcases the most frequently occurring three-character Chinese words. Given that the structure of Chinese words differs from English, it is not possible to preserve the current order in English. The conclusion that can be drawn from this quantitative analysis is that a new actor, females, has been introduced into the discussion of ICH. The context that needs to be considered here is that for thousands of years, the ICH inheritors of the ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show’ could only be males, and no woman had ever attempted this technique before. Many Chinese ICH techniques, including the ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show’, have consistently adhered to family and apprenticeship traditions, with women’s presence consistently low and overlooked. Female roles have always been absent from the inheritance of ICH in China. However, the result that women are mentioned most frequently among the top 1,000 liked comments highlights how this video allows viewers to associate women with the ICH technology of ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show’. In addition, no one had ever recorded and published a complete video of the ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show’ process on TikTok before the blogger September. She is also the first and only female experimenter in this ICH project. Therefore, by combining these two points, the high frequency of female mentions is also worth further analysis. As mentioned in the previous text, the definition of ‘living state’ dissemination is to digitize and re-imagine ICH and add new elements to it. The women extracted from the Word Cloud diagram are highly likely to be new actors in the inheritance and protection of ICH and can also be seen as new elements.

#### **4.2. Findings of qualitative thematic analysis**

Due to the high frequency of the term ‘woman’ appearing in the comments among the top 1,000 likes, it is considered in this article as a new element and new actor introduced by public engagement to ICH. The first theme to code in the comments is all Chinese words representing women. In Chinese, the term ‘women’ can be translated into many different words. Therefore, this article extracts all the comments containing these words that represent women from the 1,000 comments, resulting in a total of 161 comments, or 16.1% of all the comments. Among them, the blogger September’s own comment received 177,210 likes, two comments received over 10,000 likes, 32 comments received 20 to 100 likes, and 125 comments received less than 20 likes. Subsequently, since the dataset of comments on women obtained is not large, this conducted manual coding. This article conducts a qualitative analysis to study the public’s views on women’s involvement in the ICH of ‘Molten Iron Throwing Show’ and codes each comment’s theme separately. The results are as follows in Table 1:

Table 1: The table of theme analysis.

Theme	Keywords	Number of comments
Girls power	female, power, energy	17
Positive female images	strength, bravery, courage, intelligence, perseverance, fearlessness of hardship, and resilience	72
Explain that there is no gender bias	female (need to) wear clothes	9
Gender bias	Inherited to males instead of females	39
intentional neglect of the female inheritance of 'Melton Iron Throwing Show'	Have seen female inheritors	2
Defamation and satire against women	Not as good as male, twisted their buttocks, flightiness	3
Other	\	19

#### 4.2.1. September showcases the power of women

Out of all 161 comments that included the keyword 'female', 17 comments mention experiencing and feeling the power of women in the video where September is unafraid of difficulties, constantly practices the ICH, and ultimately succeeds. This women's power belongs not only to women themselves but also to the Chinese nation and the inheritance of ICH. For example:

*'September is really amazing! The seemingly weak girl also harbors tremendous power within her body.'*

*'It's too shocking. My shock not only comes from September being the first girl to perform, but also from the resilience buried in the bones of Chinese people. Whether it's men or women, inheriting traditional Chinese culture is full of courage, strength and power.'*

*'Girls can do everything, and I will strive to practice my own strength and leverage the advantages of women themselves. I'm just good at things other than physical force. Whether it's politics, business, or other work, I can do it all.'*

The power of women is the ability of a woman to be herself and realize her value without being controlled by anyone, and it is also a positive source. September proves through her own efforts that women's physical strength is substantial and also demonstrates her spiritual strength. She has been seen by more people and raised awareness about protecting the ICH, making significant contributions to the inheritance of 'Molten Iron Throwing Show'. At the same time, September's influence has also touched many female viewers, who are able to feel the effort and persistence September has put in as a female ICH inheritor and short video creator. They all view these as strengths derived from female peers and express their willingness to develop their expertise in more fields. The role of mutual encouragement and support among women is gradually accumulating. This power is also seen as the power of the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' by these commentators, as the spectacular scene of September hitting the stick with all her strength reflects the charm of this ICH and inspires viewers. The ICH has been visualized by September's video, which also means that the role of women and the value they bring empower the ICH.



#### 4.2.2. September's video how a positive female image and challenge gender stereotypes

72 comments, or 43.4% of all comments with the keyword 'female', express a positive attitude towards the successful completion of the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' performance by September. These comments include words such as touching, beautiful, shocking, impressive, great, outstanding, admirable, praising, and so on. At the same time, these viewers believe that September conveys qualities of strength, bravery, courage, intelligence, perseverance, fearlessness of hardship, and resilience in the video. For example:

*'Although I have always known that you are a beautiful and intelligent woman, this show really amazed me. Courage and confidence are fully displayed in you. The moment when the screen was full of iron flowers, I really choked up and moved.'*

*'Practicing one technique for over a month, September is really tough! She is brave to work hard for something and disregard the consequences. She deserves praise and appreciation.'*

*'September showcases the diligence, beauty, resilience, and fearlessness of Chinese women to the fullest! This is the Chinese spirit that we in China should convey! This is the internet celebrity girl we should have in China!'*

The comments also express affirmation and appreciation for the risks that September had to face. For instance:

*'It's really beautiful. As a girl, I am still quite afraid, after all, any touch of molten iron on my face can cause disfigurement. I admire her courage.'*

In ancient China, scholars such as Confucius commonly used the concept of yin and yang to discuss gender, categorising women as yin and men as yang and a strong patriarchal ideology still exists in Chinese society today <sup>[21]</sup>. Yin represents traits like softness, receptivity, passivity, introspection, and tranquillity, while Yang embodies characteristics such as strength, assertiveness, confidence, and dominance <sup>[21]</sup>. In contemporary China, these distinctions have not entirely disappeared despite social progress and many people still associate masculinity with qualities such as virility, courage, fearlessness, physical strength, ambition, dominance, and a sense of responsibility <sup>[22]</sup>. In contrast, they tend to associate femininity with traits such as timidity, dependence, hesitancy, lack of confidence, a lack of enterprising spirit, and a deficiency of adventurous and exploratory spirit <sup>[22]</sup>. In addition, within Chinese nationalist discourse, men are expected to fulfil specific duties and contribute to their motherland. They are tasked with various challenges such as navigating society, the workforce, intense competition, and military service for the defence of the nation <sup>[22]</sup>. These expectations often connect the future of the Chinese nation predominantly with men, hoping for their growth in strength and resilience when facing adversity. Unfortunately, such expectations do not closely align with the role attributed to women, reflecting significant limitations and misconceptions about female roles.

TikTok short videos, however, do not discriminate based on gender, granting everyone the potential to create popular videos, express their ideas, and influence others. September's video, in particular, showcases her confident acceptance of the challenge posed by the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show', her courageous confrontation of potential difficulties, her unwavering determination in the face of adversity, and her proactive commitment to the inheritance of ICH as her personal goal. In doing so, she redefines the traditional non-feminine temperament associated with Chinese culture. Through her TikTok short video, September introduces a broad range of possibilities for female representation and the support expressed by the aforementioned comments provides ample evidence that the female image viewers perceive in the video is far from passive, and their appreciation and recognition are reflected to a certain extent in their comments.

Furthermore, it's essential to recognize that social norms surrounding ideals and practices of masculinity and femininity contribute to the formation of gender stereotypes — beliefs about specific

characteristics associated with gender that are influenced by culture and the era <sup>[23]</sup>. As with the aforementioned traits, perceiving qualities such as ambition, power, and competitiveness as inherent male traits, and associating characteristics such as nurturing, empathy, timidity, and concern for others as female traits, represents typical traditional gender stereotypes <sup>[23]</sup>. For women, these stereotypes can lead not only to differential treatment and inadvertent discrimination but also impact individuals' judgments and hinder women's social standing and opportunities within society.

In this context, September's video to a certain extent challenges and weakens the stereotypes about women associated with the inheritance of ICH. In addition, both September and the comments mentioned in this section contribute to a more flexible and contemporary discourse surrounding the roles that women can play in ICH.

#### 4.2.3. September breaks the gender bias

A total of 9 comments expressed understanding of why 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' techniques have traditionally only been taught to men. In an interview with September featured in her video, a male ICH inheritor explains that performers need to sense the temperature of molten iron as it scatters through the air and falls, a task often performed without wearing clothes. Moreover, the performer must also exert an incredibly powerful force to accurately strike the wooden stick to succeed in the practice. These factors have been historically viewed as precautions to protect women. Many commentators also agree with this viewpoint, asserting that the skills are not restricted to men but rather stem from women's impracticality in performing the act without clothing. Some examples of these comments are as follows:

*'I have also heard that when doing the performance, people cannot wear clothes because iron sparks fall off during sweating and will not stick to the body, making it less prone to burns. It is estimated that girls are not allowed to inherit because they cannot do it without wearing clothes, which is my guess.'*

*'Well, to be honest, it's usually boys who do the performance. It's not that girls can't do it, mainly because they need to take off their tops, otherwise their clothes may burn easily.'*

Furthermore, there are comments emphasizing that the exclusion of women from performing the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' is not due to gender bias but rather a practical necessity. For example:

*'Friendly explanation: Actually, the reason why women cannot learn the Melton Iron Throwing Show is because they need to be naked. Therefore, performers are all men, and there is no gender bias.'*

Some individuals also argue that not allowing women to participate in this activity is a form of protection. They state:

*'It really makes sense not to allow girls to participate in this project, as it is protecting them. They are wearing clothes, and molten iron will fall onto them, which poses a certain risk and may cause burns.'*

In summary, according to these comments, the reason women have not historically been inheritors of the 'Molten Iron Throwing Show' is primarily due to practical factors. The necessity to wear clothing during the performance is considered a form of protection rather than gender bias.

In contrast, 39 comments put forward a contrary point of view and express rejection of the idea of transmitting the skill exclusively to men, emphasizing that it amounts to gender bias. They assert that behind this biased notion of prioritizing men over women lies the belief that women are weak, prone to injury, and incapable of performing the act. Indeed, September's video serves as tangible proof that women are more than capable of succeeding in this endeavour. These comments argue that nothing should be predetermined in terms of whether women can perform such acts; instead, equal opportunities should be provided for women to attempt it. September's work is seen as breaking this prejudiced belief as she represents a women showcasing her ability in inheriting ICH. For example:

*'I watched the video with tears in my eyes. I am amazed not only by the exquisite craftsmanship that has been passed down for thousands of years, but also by the courage of a woman in a new era, fearless of difficulties and daring to pursue the ultimate. I hope September is not afraid of secular prejudices and vulgar language, and still firmly choose her own direction and path.'*

*'I think it's more like breaking the tradition of not passing on to women than doing a performance. It's also a great way for Chinese women to break their limitations. This vivid iron flower overflowing in the air is like a great way for Chinese women to become global. I think it's very worthy.'*

In addition, one comment points out that the opinion that not allowing women to perform the ICH is to protect them actually hinders women:

*'Protection is also a constraint, and girls can also do what boys can do, as long as they are willing. There is no gender difference.'*

Another comment also emphasizes that the concept of transmitting the ICH to men rather than to women should not exist at all:

*'No matter what the reason is, the phenomenon of transmitting men rather than women should not exist should not exist, even if it is for the sake of women. The real way to be good for women is to let them know the pros and cons, and then choose whether to learn or not, rather than directly prohibiting women from learning under the pretext of being good for women.'*

As expressed in these comments, in the context of the inheritance of ICH in China, the preference for transmitting male rather than female knowledge reflects the gender bias entrenched by patriarchal norms. This bias originates from traditional beliefs and social structures that prioritize male authority and inheritance rights. Chinese society still holds the perspective that women do not truly belong to the family because they typically take their husband's surname upon marriage, thus denying them inheritance rights. Consequently, numerous female groups in China remain marginalized and unable to participate in the preservation of ICH and traditional culture. Focusing on male mentor-apprentice and father-son inheritance is limited, as it blocks many talented women from an invisible door, putting some ICH practices on the brink of extinction. Prioritizing men as inheritors not only reinforces gender bias but also constrains women's opportunities to explore and enrich diverse cultures and ICH, thereby hindering the potential for future ICH development and enhancement. Furthermore, ICH cannot receive adequate protection when women are denied inheritance rights and opportunities.

The aforementioned comments reflect resistance against prejudice. As Simões et al. <sup>[24]</sup> suggest, some feminist discourse may inadvertently focus on reinforcing dominant values (consent) rather than effectively representing forces of change (resistance). This focus on consent may unintentionally perpetuate traditional gender bias and societal norms, normalizing the unequal treatment of women <sup>[24]</sup>. When considering the traditional concept of transmitting knowledge from men to men rather than to women, if this practice is not challenged, the embedded gender bias may continue to pervade China's ICH, endangering many aspects of Chinese ICH. Gender-related preconceptions, biases, and underestimations of women's capabilities contribute to the obstacles and limitations faced by women across various professions and fields. Consequently, a growing number of Chinese women are determined to challenge these prejudices. In September's video, she demonstrates through her actions that women have the strength to perform the ICH, even while wearing fewer clothes, and she shows an adventurous spirit unafraid of potential dangers. Most importantly, September proves that women can be the inheritors of the 'Melton Iron Throwing Show'. The comments and discussions generated by the video opposing this bias underscore the inequality it engenders, the Chinese public's dissatisfaction with such bias, and the significance attached to gender equality and women's rights. Numerous comments express a collective refusal to accept the inferior treatment of women or their subordination in various fields.

Finally, there are comments expressing optimism for the future of Chinese women, emphasizing their infinite potential. For example:

*‘One of the original intentions of this video is that women should not be defined. Her skin can be delicate or rough; She can have great strength and also ask for help from others; She can be a housewife or an elite in the workplace; She can be full of courage and allowed to be afraid. These are not related to gender. Women are all independent individuals who can become anything.’*

Comments such as this highlight the need for society to eschew entrenched biases against women, enabling them to pursue their aspirations without undue influence. As more women, such as September, unapologetically express themselves and present diverse identities, the chorus of voices dictating how women should behave or who they should become will diminish. By abandoning the gender bias ingrained in the inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), we anticipate a future where more women can actively participate in preserving and passing down ICH traditions. Their involvement promises to infuse new vigour and possibilities into ICH.

#### **4.2.4. Intentional neglect of the female inheritance of the show**

While relatively few in number, 2 comments mention seeing women perform the ‘Melton Iron Throwing Show’, as illustrated by the following examples:

*‘There are girls performing ‘Melton Iron Throwing Show’. I have seen them many times, and they are performed during holidays and festivals.’*

*‘To be honest, our city used to have ‘Melton Iron Throwing Show’ on a square before, and the performers there were all women. I was also shocked why such dangerous performances were all performed by women. Later, I realised that women should not be a symbol of weakness.’*

These 2 comments, to a certain extent, shed light on the overlooked role of women in the inheritance of ICH. They indicate that there have been female performers or inheritors of the ‘Melton Iron Throwing Show’, albeit without official documentation or recognition. The male inheritor featured in September’s video also confirms that this tradition had traditionally been passed down solely to men. This phenomenon may be rooted in gender-based discrimination or exclusion, underscoring the persistence of patriarchal norms and practices that marginalize women and limit their access to resources, opportunities, or decision-making authority<sup>[23]</sup>. Women’s contributions to the creation and preservation of ICH often go underestimated, with their activities traditionally relegated to the private or familial sphere, while the more prominent, significant, and prestigious public sphere has historically been male-dominated.

Regrettably, women may not receive the recognition and support they deserve for their invaluable contributions to ICH, and they may even be excluded from the inheritance process altogether. Neglecting the involvement of women may also result in overlooking their unique perspectives and insights into ICH, ultimately limiting the potential for innovation, development, and deepening gender inequality. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge the significance of the attention and likes garnered by September’s video. This underscores the undeniable and necessary role that women must play in the preservation and safeguarding of ICH. As more people see women taking part in these cultural practices, it is inevitable that traditional gender stereotypes and concepts will be challenged and reshaped.

#### **4.2.5. Defamation and satire against women still exist**

In contrast to the overwhelming majority of positive comments on September’s video, 3 comments exhibit disrespect and satire towards September and other women.

First, a comment raises doubts about the authenticity of September’s video:

*‘Melton Iron Throwing Show is not performed by the female blogger herself. Just slow video playback and you will see.’*

Second, an individual compares September’s technique unfavourably with male inheritors:

*'Male performers do indeed have finer, more scattered, and more beautiful melton iron blossom compared with this woman.'*

Finally, one comment uses satire to praise September while deriding other female short video bloggers:

*'Such an excellent video with so few likes, why are there hundreds of likes from popular women who have twisted their buttocks a few times and show off their flightiness.'*

These comments show a tangible manifestation of employing negative stereotypes to resist societal changes concerning women in the digital public domain. Such comments denigrate, accuse, and objectify women, insinuating their inferiority to men by demeaning them. Rooted in gender discrimination and misogyny prevalent in society, these comments aim to undermine the value and significance of women's contributions to ICH, belittling their ideas and knowledge while perpetuating harmful biases. The act of ridiculing and mocking can have a detrimental impact on women's self-esteem and confidence, further obstructing their engagement in ICH preservation efforts and personal development. This undermines their rightful recognition and sustains a culture of exclusion and marginalization. It also highlights the challenges and doubts that women may encounter when speaking out and advocating for ICH protection on social media.

## 5. Conclusion

Thanks to its precision, accessibility, interactivity, user experience, and affordability, TikTok has transcended the limitations of time, cultural backgrounds, regions, genders, and interpersonal heritage. This phenomenon highlights the substantial advantages of social media communication as a means to digitally preserve and advance Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). An analysis of the above article reveals that TikTok short videos effectively engage the public in the protection and inheritance of ICH. In turn, public engagement has introduced a fresh perspective through female participation in ICH content communication on TikTok, which has led to a digital reimagining aimed at reducing gender stereotypes, biases, and inequalities in ICH inheritance, thereby empowering women to contribute to its dynamic preservation. Despite occasional criticism, women's knowledge, skills, unique perspectives, and charisma render them indispensable contributors to ICH preservation. Similar to other internet platforms and software, TikTok embodies the spirit of information freedom and cultural non-conformity. This has inspired many Chinese women to adopt a more radical stance, with the political potential to reshape gender discourse and foster new models of feminist activism in China.

As women's influence in discourse grows, so does their enthusiasm for preserving ICH, thereby opening up new possibilities for its inheritance. Be it TikTok's attributes or women's inherent strengths, women are poised to increasingly contribute to all aspects of ICH. Furthermore, the fresh perspectives and depth of knowledge offered by women's groups can enrich the understanding of ICH practices and lead to a more comprehensive representation. Finally, when women truly integrate into Chinese society and are fully accepted by ICH inheritance, the cohesion and social bonds of the entire society will be strengthened, resulting in a deeper sense of national unity and cultural connotation.

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